Between professional autonomy and public responsibility: accountability and responsiveness in Dutch media and journalism

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Chapter 1

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1.1 Debate on media performance
The debate on media responsibility and accountability in the Netherlands seems to have gained attention in recent years. Not only within the academic discourse (Bardoel & d’Haenens, 2004a, 2004b; Brants & Bardoel, 2008; McQuail, 2003), but particularly so in the political and public debate (Broertjes, 2006; Jansen & Drok, 2005; RMO, 2003; ROB, 2003). Politicians and public bodies complain about an apparently increasing power of the media. Politicians are dissatisfied with the kind of attention they get, dislike what they see as the media’s cynicism and focus on scandal, sound-bites and hypes, and blame them for telling half truths and whole lies (Brants, 2000; Brants & Bardoel, 2008; Brants & Van Praag, 2005; Vasterman, 2004). Research by Van Aelst et al. (2008) showed that 62 percent of the members of Parliament in the Netherlands believe that the media have too much power and that the media and not the government set the political agenda. The representation of politics is said to be negative, personalised and often framed in terms of strategy and conflict (Brants & Van Praag, 2006). And according to politicians, this negative view of politics in the media has a negative effect on the public. At least, politicians blame the media for the distancing relationship between politics and the public. It seems as if media institutions, entrusted with a public service to democracy, are losing the trust of the political institutions (Van Vree et al., 2003).

Among members of the public trust in the media is also not self-evident anymore, at least voiced in public opinion polls (Eurobarometer, 2006, 2010; SCP, 2009) with a growing debate on the role and increasing power of the media (Bardoel, 2003). In the public debate media have been placed under the scrutiniser’s magnifying glass, especially after specific incidents hit public opinion. Two cases stand out. First, the Srebrenica massacres during the Balkan war (1995) and the way journalists reported them led to an intense internal media debate. Seven years later the Netherlands Institute for War Documentation (NIOD [Nederlands Instituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie],
2002) concluded that next to political and military mistakes, the performance of the media had to be questioned. Research showed their coverage was biased, portraying the Serbians as the ‘bad guys’ and siding with the Bosnians, and all of it laden with emotions (Wieten, 2002).

Second, Dutch media were again under fire in 2002, accused of demonizing Dutch populist politician Pim Fortuyn. In his criticism of the political establishment Fortuyn had included the media, which, he claimed, failed to see the ills of society, particularly the effects of immigration. When he was murdered in 2002 by a Dutch environmental activist, his followers blamed the ‘left-wing’ political and media elite for having created an atmosphere, which ultimately lead to his death. Fortuyn’s successor and others claimed, ‘the bullet came from the left’, triggering a debate about the responsibility of the media (Brants & Bardoel, 2008).

It is not only specific incidents like these, however, that indicate a growing discontent of the media; politicians of established parties also blamed them for their poor performance. During a speech on the Day of Press Freedom in 2004, Christian Democratic Minister of Justice Piet Hein Donner stated angrily:

> Press freedom is eroding. The press serves as a watchdog for democracy, but a watchdog that barks too often is useless. An information channel that distorts the information fulfils no function. In any other sector where the product is so vital for society and the risk of a loss of quality so great, the government would have intervened. The principle of press freedom makes this impossible. Consequently this is a task for the press itself, given the potential danger and social harm of media that behave as a political actor without showing accountability (Donner, 2004; translation in Brants & Bardoel 2008: 472).

More recently, Green Left politician Femke Halsema, was milder during the 50th anniversary of the Dutch Council for Journalism, but still quite critical of the role of the media and their preparedness to reflect on their performance and be accountable.

> While recognizing that the current economic conditions for journalists are troublesome, this does not relieve them of their duty to conduct an open debate on
the quality of their work. Self-reflection, internal criticism and evaluations are not, in my careful estimation, actions pursued willingly by most journalists (Halsema, 2010).

At election time this criticism of the media is not surprising, since politicians and journalists often have different and maybe opposite ideas of what can and should be reported on and how (Brants & Van Praag, 2005). There might even be something wrong if they were completely happy with each other. Yet, the critical tone seems louder and the diversity of voices greater.

The issue of media performance landed on the political agenda in 2003 when two government advisory commissions, the Council for Social Development (RMO [Raad voor Maatschappelijke Ontwikkeling]) and the Council for Public Administration (ROB [Raad voor het Openbaar Bestuur]), explicitly questioned the media’s role and power. RMO saw the public domain and the political process to be increasingly subject to media logic, where these signifying institutions construct reality and frame issues and people (Brants & Van Praag, 2006; RMO, 2003). The Commission proposed strategies to counterbalance the negative consequences of media logic, including the suggestion that media more actively show their accountability to the public.

The advice of ROB focused specifically on the increasingly intertwining relationship between media and politics, which it described as a LAT-relationship too close for comfort. Blaming the media for setting the political agenda and dominating the public debate, it proposed that media and politics should take a more distant and independent position to serve their public role. The Minister responsible for the media at the time sympathised with these suggestions, but for fear of interfering in press freedom emphasised the facilitating role of government, putting the responsibility of being accountable on the media, including stimulating public and professional debate (Ministerie OCW [Ministry Education, Culture and Science], 2004, 2008a).

The key question that this dissertation addresses is how media are responding to these criticisms on their performance. The sense of urgency that surrounds this issue is, however, not only instigated by these negative voices. The backdrop for this increased attention for media responsibility and accountability is

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1 All translations are mine (YdH) except when indicated otherwise.
formed by a number of, often interrelated, structural changes in both society and the media (Bardoel & d’Haenens, 2004b; Brants, 2003; Brants & De Haan, 2010).

1.2 Societal and media developments

To understand the context in which the public and political debate on media responsibility and accountability has developed, a number of significant societal and media changes in the past decades need to be considered, particularly the processes of individualisation, secularisation and depillarisation, the changing relationship between media and politics, the professionalisation of journalism, commercialization of media and, lastly, the advent of the Internet. These changes form the context in which the question of media discontent and their subsequent response should be analysed. An analytical review of these factors is therefore a prerequisite for addressing the primary research topic.

In the report ‘A quarter of a century of social changes in the Netherlands’ of the Netherlands Institute of Social Research (SCP [Sociaal Cultureel Planbureau]), individualisation is characterised as “one of the major changes of the social dynamics in the past twenty-five years” (SCP, 1998: 3). This process is characterised by a declining interest in traditional norms and values and an increasing number of single households. Whereas in the past, people lived primarily in collective entities, individualisation has created more room and autonomy for different values and life styles and, according to Brants (2007) an increasing orientation on consuming for individual desires.

Individualisation is often seen as a consequence or explanation of the second trend: secularisation and de-pillarization (Boutelier, De Beer & Van Praag, 2004). The process of secularisation has contributed to more individual values, no longer bound to the collective norms of the church. Where once quite a religious country, the Netherlands is now even the most secularized in Western Europe (Becker & De Hart, 2006; Becker & Vinck, 1994; Knippenberg, 1998). More than two-thirds of the Dutch population does ‘not believe’ any longer and among those who do, the proportion that goes to church regularly has diminished from 67 percent in 1970 to 38 percent in 2004 (Becker & De Hart, 2006). But this has not always been the case.
In contrast, the first half of the twentieth century, the Netherlands is characterised by religious and socio-political cleavages, with people more or less compartmentalized in Roman-Catholic, Protestant, socialist and liberal ‘pillars’. Belonging to a zuil or pillar meant that you lived up to the norms and values of the denomination and ‘lived in’ the organisations that came with it: from sports club to labour union, from school to undertaking business, and from political party to newspaper or broadcasting organisation, the pillar was the leading light and provided the organisational structure. In the 1960s this started to break down and, once the self-evidence of choosing the medium of your pillar disappeared, the political parallelism between parties and media began to be dismantled. As a result, the equally self-evident trust relationship between media and their public started to fade. Viewers did not only watch programmes of their pillar, but with in the beginning only one television channel “everyone saw everything” (De Goede, 1999: 139). Moreover, when the illegal foreign or ‘offshore’ commercial channels (such as Radio Veronica) started to find their way to the Dutch television, offering new, international preferences, they were favoured by a large number of viewers (Bardoel & d’Haenens, 2004b).

The third major trend affecting the relationship between media, politics and public and addressing the issue of media responsibility is the changing relationship between media and politics. Brants and Van Praag (2006) refer to the period of pillarization as partisan logic, in which the media functioned as a platform for the political elite. Journalists generally performed as ‘lapdogs’ of the leaders of the pillars, obediently following the agenda and the interpretation of reality set in the political arena. At the end of the 1960s journalism emancipated to ‘watchdogs’, while political parties were not only confronted with independent journalists, but also with floating voters. From the turn of the century political parties entered a phase of serious uncertainty: membership and loyalty declined sharply and the volatility of the voters at election time (now the highest in Europe) prompted also political parties to develop strategies to (re)connect with their voters (Brants, 2002; Van Praag & Adriaansen, 2011). Both political parties and media had to regain trust and loyalty of the floating voter and switching public. This has created a new ‘political-publicity complex’, in which media and politics are caught in a symbiotic relationship, both fighting to get the attention of the same public (ROB, 2003; Van Vree et al., 2003).
At the same time, media independence meant a more critical and professional journalistic approach of politics, strengthened by the introduction of the first School of Journalism in 1966 and formalised in the first official editorial statute in 1974. This statute guaranteed editorial independence from any external influences, including the media’s owner or management. For many journalists this statute was a final confirmation of their autonomy, be it that broadcasting organisations were very hesitant in introducing it (Wijfjes, 2004). Media gradually loosened the ties with political parties and as independent watchdogs critically followed the political process. But to bond with their publics they not only had to perform independently but also provide attractive content. Next to the symbiosis of the new political-publicity complex, the critical and infotainment driven journalism that characterised the shift from partisan to a media driven logic also turned politicians and journalists into mutually distrusting antagonists (Brants & Van Praag, 2006; Jansen & Drok, 2005).

A fourth trend is the increasing commercialization of and the consequent growth in competition between media actors. Already in the 1960s signs were visible in the public broadcasting sector. The new Broadcasting Act of 1967 opened the door for new entrants, next to the traditional pillars. The first one was TROS, which originally started as an illegal commercial enterprise from a former oil-drilling platform in the North Sea. It did not represent any specific denomination in Dutch society, but its breaking with the traditional, paternalistic attitude of the other public broadcasters and their light amusement programmes certainly attracted a large audience. But TROS was still a member of the non-commercial broadcasting ‘family’. It took until 1989 – first with RTL and later SBS - before commercial broadcasting established a legal position in the broadcasting market. The introduction of a dual system in the Netherlands did not only impact the broadcasting structure, but also led to shifts in media content and a more market driven and audience focused style with more entertainment and sensationalistic characteristics (Brants, 2003). The change has not gone unnoticed and has resulted not only in appreciation of large segments of the public, but also in outspoken objections. Particularly the more left-leaning socio-political elite were concerned about media’s responsibility in an increasing commercial media market (Brants, 1998).
Commercial trends have also been visible in the newspaper market. Increasing press concentration has led to a domination of a small number of large publishing enterprises operating across national and cultural borders. Changes in lay-out and formats are prompted by the primary goal of attracting a larger audience and bringing to a halt the declining circulation figures. Both in press and broadcasting a shift is visible from a supply to a demand media market (Van Cuylenburg, 1998), focusing more on the wants and desires of the public.

Lastly, the emergence of the Internet did not only introduce new media forms, but also had impact on the journalism profession and its relationship with its public. Consultation, hypertextuality, multimediality and interactivity are four unique characteristics of the Internet that not only strengthened the position of the media user, but also affected online journalism (Bardoel & Deuze, 2001; Deuze, 2003). It created greater opportunities for journalists to get in closer contact with the public. Offline media have introduced online discussion forums, feedback opportunities and increasingly publish the email addresses of journalists (Hermida, 2010; Paulussen et al., 2007). The use of the Internet has fuelled optimism about democratic participation and active citizenship, now that everyone can contribute to media coverage by offering user-generated content or audience material and be part of the media production process (Bowman & Willis, 2003; Gillmor, 2004; Wardle & Williams, 2010). This has led to fading boundaries between producer and consumer and the emergence of the so-called prosumer (Deuze, 2003). The asymmetrical relationship, where the journalist decides what news to provide the public, has turned into a more symmetrical relationship, where the journalist is more responsive to the needs of the public (Pavlik, 2001).

However, the Internet has also created pitfalls for trust in journalism and media performance. There are worries that the increased interaction between media and users and the relative power of the latter might weaken the occupation’s professional authority (Lowrey & Anderson, 2005). Most people in countries like the Netherlands now have access to the Internet and can act as journalists, which puts the definition and role of the professional journalist into question. The growing number of amateur journalists also undermines the credibility of media coverage as they are not too keen on keeping to journalistic ethical principles (Schillelans, 2003). Moreover, it has led to new questions of performance and regulation. McQuail (2003) holds that
the Internet has provoked a ‘moral panic’ regarding its unaccountable and unregulated character, challenging the content’s credibility.

The combination of these five trends has led to shifts in the triangular relationship between media, politics and the public. On the one hand, it has led to a widening gap. In the past, public life in the Netherlands was organised in pillars with media closely connected to political parties and supported by a loyal public. The process of secularisation and individualisation in society and the professionalisation of journalism have led to a greater distance between media and their public. At the same time, due to these trends, the citizen has distanced his or herself from traditional values and norms, has become better educated, resulting in a more assertive citizen, making ever greater demands on society and the media (Bardoel & d’Haenens, 2004b; Mitchell & Blumler, 1994; Pritchard, 2000). On the other hand, media trends like concentration, fragmentation and commercialization, show that media are focused more on reaching out to the public, amending the gap. The attention for the role of citizens and consumers is now greater than ever.

1.3 Shifts in governance

Together with, or maybe as a result of, an increasing debate on media performance there is a growing demand for accountability towards the public in Dutch media policy. Successive commissions - Ververs in 1996, the Scientific Council for Social Development (RMO) and the Council for Public Administration (ROB) in 2003, the Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR [Wetenschappelijke Raad voor Regeringsbeleid]) in 2005 and the Council of Culture (Raad voor Cultuur) in 2008 – have suggested better safeguards for media’s socially responsible role and more attention for accountability in a rapidly changing media environment. In 2008, the Minister responsible for the media proposed in his press policy plan to invest more in media self-regulation and journalism conduct (Ministerie OCW, 2008a).

Traditionally, broadcasting policy is based on legal mechanisms of accountability. However, more recently the role of government is becoming more distant in this, and there is more on what media and other involved actors could contribute. It looks as if the issue of media accountability is becoming more prominent and shifting from government initiation to a shared responsibility of the involved actors. The role of the state has changed, as a result of liberalizing
policies at the level of the European Union (EU) and most nation-states. Media governance has become the new concept, expressing a more modest role for the state and the growing importance of other actors in the media policy field, including private market partners, but also the journalistic profession, citizens and civil society (Bardoel, 2008).

In this sense, a shift can be noticed from government to governance, from regulation by government and its civil servants to more self-regulation by the media and other involved actors (d’Haenens, 2007; d’Haenens, Mansell & Sarikakis, 2010; Latzer et al., 2003; Puppis, 2007, 2010; Schulz & Held, 2004; Van Kersbergen & Van Waarden, 2004). The Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research sees the issue of governance as “one of the most significant developments in modern societies in the past decades” (NWO, 2004: 4). In response to an increasingly general distrust of people in institutions, the White Paper on European Governance (Commission of the European Communities, 2001) emphasised the need for new forms of policy-making processes that involve citizens more actively, emphasizing negotiation, accommodation, and cooperation (Harlow, 2002; Mulgan, 2003). Governance encompasses the regulatory structure as a whole, combining public and private, formal and informal, hierarchical and network forms of coordination (Latzer, 2007; Puppis, 2007). Van Kersbergen and Van Waarden (2004) note that the concept is used in different disciplines with different meanings, but all do have in common that governance emphasises processes of governing in contrast to structures of government. It is “governing with and through networks” (Rhodes, 2007:1246). In this sense the concept refers to a multi-stakeholder approach (Meier & Perrin, 2007). Different stakeholders are asked to take their responsibility in safeguarding the performance of the media. Puppis (2010) distinguishes between vertical and horizontal forms of governance. The former refers to different levels of regulation, either global, regional (such as EU) or national media regulation. A shift in vertical governance from national to European level is visible in public broadcasting, where since 1989 EU policy-making has begun to dominate the national level (Bardoel & d’Haenens, 2004a). Governance does not only relate to ‘governance beyond the state’, but also ‘governance without government’ or horizontal governance. Horizontal extensions of media governance relate to regulation, co-regulation or self-regulation. Moreover, a distinction can be made between governance that is collective (affecting media systems) and governance that is organisational (affecting media organisations).
This shared responsibility of the involved actors in decision-making, policy-making, and organisation and regulation can possibly enhance trust between the involved parties, contrary to enforceable legislation that is often seen as undermining the trust between the involved parties (Bovens, 2007; ROB, 2010)

1.4 Media’s response

The discontent on their role has not been left unnoticed by the media themselves. With the Srebrenica report and the Fortuyn incidents, 2002 was a significant year for the media, obliging them to critically look at their own performance. This might indicate some form of shared responsibility between the involved actors. In the words of the chair of the Association of Editors-in-chief (NGH [Nederlands Genootschap van Hoofdredacteuren]) in his annual speech of 2003, “How strange it may sound: it has been a beneficial year for the internal journalistic debate” (Broertjes, 2006: 67). Leading Dutch journalists even pointed the finger at themselves. In that same year, the editor-in-chief of the public broadcasting news organisation NOS and his colleague from national newspaper NRC Handelsblad reflected on the role of the media during the rise and murder of the politician Fortuyn in a brochure called ‘Self-reflection and self-criticism in the media’ (Jensma & Laroes, 2003). In 2006, a former newspaper correspondent in the Middle-East, Joris Luyendijk, published a book about his experiences in the Middle-East and his problems with objective journalism. He opted for more transparency in the way journalists work and gather their information. On a media professional website a journalist more or less summarised a general feeling, “Trust in media is not self-evident anymore. Trust is an agreement between two parties that continuously has to be acknowledged. This trust needs to be regained and transparency plays a crucial role” (De Nieuwe Reporter, 2007: 43).

In 2008, the Dutch Ministry responsible for media organised a workshop for academics, media organisations and professionals, and policy designers to evaluate the public accountability suggestions made by the RMO and ROB five years before (Ministerie OCW, 2008b). A general conclusion was that accountability, including journalistic codes and ombudsmen, topped the agenda of media organisations and professionals. Bardoel and d’Haenens (2004b) too observe a slow but growing acknowledgment of the media to initiate accountability measures.
Next but also related to self-criticism of journalistic performance, there is growing recognition of a widening gap between media and the public. Newspapers and television programmes have attempted to revitalize a community feeling and connecting with the public, either through new interactive instruments on the Internet or public debates (Brants & De Haan, 2010; Jansen & Drok, 2005). Policy documents of Dutch public broadcasting have recently emphasised the relationship with the public and the need for more instruments of accountability and responsiveness. The editor-in-chief of the Dutch public broadcasting news organisation NOS admitted, "There is a growing distance between media and media consumers, driving the questions of legitimacy and trust within ourselves" (Laroes, 2003: 34). And to top it all, as of 2010 the Netherlands Press Fund has allocated €3 million to regional and national newspapers, supporting various initiatives to connect with the audience.

1.5 This dissertation

The above structural changes and growing criticism of the media’s performance were traditionally an issue for governmental media policy. However, the gradual shift to governance arrangements and the increasing emphasis on a shared responsibility including that of the media leaves me with the question how media themselves are responding and taking initiatives to show their responsibility and accountability, both at institutional and professional level. Besides the societal relevance, this dissertation aims to contribute to the academic debate on the concepts media responsibility and accountability through an analysis of the theoretical notions. These concepts are often used in daily practice, but the meaning of them is often confusing and sometimes overlapping. Moreover, academic literature on this subject often remains at a theoretical or policy level with little empirical research (Bardoel & d’Haenens, 2004a, 2004b; McQuail, 2003; Plaisance, 2000) or only tackles a specific instrument of accountability (e.g. De Haan & Bardoel, 2009; Evers, Groenhart & Groesen, 2009; Mentink, 2006; Nemeth, 2003; Van Dalen & Deuze, 2006). My aim is to take a look in media practice and understand how media organisations and the journalism profession are coping with the subject and taking and possibly embracing measures.
The following research question is addressed:

*How are Dutch news media and journalists responding to criticism of their performance and to what extent have any measures been adopted?*

To answer this research question, I took several research steps with an empirical focus on the Netherlands. Nevertheless, the findings of this research might well resonate in other Western European countries that cope with similar challenges (e.g. Baldi & Hasebrink, 2007; Eberwein et al., 2011; Von Krogh, 2008). This introduction shows that there is a general feeling that criticism of media performance has increased or at least there is a growing attention for the subject. ‘It’s the media that did it’ is commonly used in both public and political debate. To go beyond the common sense, in Chapter 2 I conducted a longitudinal analysis on the media performance debate and the response of the media. Firstly, I analysed how the performance debate has developed over the years, what issues were raised, to what extent media criticism has increased and what factors triggered it. The following sub-question is answered:

*Which issues have been prominent in the debate on media performance and what criticism of media and journalism has been voiced over the last 20 years?*

Covering a period of 20 years, from 1987 till 2007, I conducted a content analysis of the media professional debate by analysing the articles of the biweekly professional trade magazine *De Journalist* (now *Villamedia*), which reflects the internal discussion of journalists. Following that, an analysis was conducted of the public debate, as represented in the Dutch quality newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*. While the first content analysis aimed to obtain an overall view of the salient issues in the media professional debate, the analysis of the public debate was important to get a more thorough understanding of the specific debate on media criticism.

These analyses of the media debate were primarily aimed at fully understanding how media are responding to structural and performance challenges. Both content analyses did shed some light on the media’s responses. In addition, I applied two other methods to see how media responded over time. First, I carried out document analysis of the annual reports and transcripts of official speeches of media ‘umbrella’ organisations over a period of 20 years. Second, I
conducted expert interviews with representatives of these same organisations. Through these methods the following second sub-question could be answered:

*How have the institutions and actors concerned responded to, coped with, and accommodated to these pressures?*

This longitudinal analysis did not only offer me a more thorough understanding of the debate over time, but it also revealed that in the debate on media performance not two but four concepts are prominent. There is not only a growing attention for responsibility and accountability, but also the concepts trust and responsiveness are central in the media debate. It looks like trust in the media for taking their responsible role is questioned. This has triggered a demand for media to be more transparent and accountable. However, media prefer to respond to be responsive to the public. In Chapter 3, the definitions of these concepts and their intertwined relationship are reviewed, which also form the theoretical basis for the following phase. This chapter concludes with answering the third sub-question:

*What are the concepts that steer and interpret the debate about the performance of the media, and how are they challenged?*

The longitudinal and conceptual study provided me with a comprehensive analysis of the shifts in the media performance debate and the growing demand for accountability and responsiveness. In the last research phase I wanted to explore how the media at both the institutional and professional level are currently coping with the criticism of their performance and the subsequent loss of trust and how they have translated this into specific instruments of accountability and responsiveness. Rather than simply listing and describing the types of instruments, I wanted to understand the reasoning behind these introduced instruments and to what extent accountability and responsiveness are adopted in daily journalistic practice. The following sub-question is addressed:

*How are responses to criticism translated into the daily practice of media institutions and to what extent are they part of the organisation structure and editorial culture?*
The answer is based on case studies of a newspaper, a public broadcaster and a commercial broadcaster, the design and method of which are elaborated in chapter 4.

Chapter 5 presents the results of the case study of the Dutch national newspaper, de Volkskrant, based on three months observation at the editorial office and interviews with journalists at all levels of the organisation. Also three months took a study of the newsroom of NOS Nieuws of the public service broadcasting organisation NPO. In Chapter 6 the results of this case are presented. Lastly, Chapter 7 elaborates on a case study of the commercial broadcasting news organisation, RTL Nieuws. The final chapter brings all the conceptual considerations and empirical findings together in answering the question of what result the criticism of media performance has had on the structure of media organisations and professional attitude.